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Review

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REVIEW

Reviews

Tabbi, Joseph. *Nobody Grew but the Business: on the life and work of William Gaddis*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015. 255pp

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Who was William Gaddis (1922–1998)? For a time the tall tales around the man—bohemian aristocrat, latter day cowboy, iconoclast and recluse—seemed as extensive as one of his gargantuan novels. None have done more to sort out precisely what of Gaddis’s “known” past is fact and what fiction than Joseph Tabbi, in this new biography. And many of the gems of *Nobody Grew but the Business* come in showing just how relevant certain of the biographical truths are, both for the changes in 20th century American culture they exemplify, and for the fiction of a writer Tabbi unabashedly calls “the novelist for our time” (11). *Nobody Grew* is the first book-length biography of Gaddis, and in it Tabbi doubles as biographer and critic, reading Gaddis’s life into his novels, his novels into American culture, and the culture back into the author’s life. What makes Gaddis’s time “our time” and his defiance our deliverance, for Tabbi, is a rare ability to demonstrate that “the political state, the economy, and religion are not just topics for an ambitious writer: these things are themselves fictions that a great writer can inhabit, and imagine—*differently*” (5). Tabbi’s central claim is that Gaddis did just that.

Tabbi suggests that Gaddis’s participatory imaginary has too often been seen as a flaw. One of the biography’s goals is to garner a wider readership for the author known either—to his detractors—as the “Mr. Difficult” of Jonathan Franzen’s infamous 2002 *New Yorker* article, or—to his few but fiercely loyal adherents—as a writer

too often reduced to a literary little brother to Thomas Pynchon. Tabbi acknowledges with a shrug that Richard Powers, himself, and many others only picked up a Gaddis novel after some Pynchon-adjacent hearsay led him there (the same was true of myself). *Nobody Grew* seeks to develop for Gaddis an independent renown. As Gaddis fictively reimagined his own life in and around institutions like the Christian religion in *The Recognitions* (1955), postwar financialized capitalism in *J R* (1975), and the litigious American legal system in *A Frolic of One's Own* (1994), he proffered highly imaginative yet all too real possibilities for these institutions' downfall. Emphasizing Gaddis's—and especially *J R*'s—prophetic elements, *Nobody Grew* reframes Gaddis's career in relation to the 2008 financial crisis. Tabbi contends that few writers better diagnosed or demonstrated than Gaddis (and Gaddis no better than in *J R*) how a world “without the authority of religion, and without moral absolutes, could easily be overwhelmed by a corporate culture where all differences become relative, all human relations negotiable, all ‘others’ just like us and hence reducible to exchange according to market value” (65).

But for Tabbi, Gaddis's way into this world is also a way out, since a necessary premise of Gaddis's style is that if readers “want [their] experience to *be* literary, [they] need to participate in the construction of meaning” (5). Thus reading a Gaddis novel becomes a secret schooling in reimagining the state apparatuses that dominate modern life. Such lofty ambition might indeed earn Gaddis his moniker as Mr. Difficult, but for Tabbi, reinhabiting the global forms of daily life *through* and *as* fiction so as to differently construe meaning in our lives makes Gaddis a Mr. Necessary.

Those familiar with Gaddis's novels—the early, towering *Recognitions*, the long-gestated follow up masterpiece on American business *J R*, the minor *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985), the final *Frolic* through the legal system, and the posthumous *Agapē Agape* (2002)—know them to be both an “anticipation of literary postmodernism” and an “exhaustive account of the world system as it impinges on every aspect of contemporary life” (12). Tabbi argues that what makes Gaddis's mark amongst the many “systems novelists” (to use Tom LeClair's term) is the variety of ways he sustainedly “bring[s] the human into contact with processes and technical languages

that determine our situation, that shape our state, our corporate systems, and our cultures" (184). And more so than in a Pynchon or Powers, Tabbi sees Gaddis's lasting purchase on readerly *attention* as crucial to this necessary reimagining of modern life. Indeed, four of Gaddis's novels moor the reader in an unrelenting now, sustained through Gaddis's signature use of extended dialogue, for nearly the entirety of the book. The effect of such a fixed gaze is that, like Nietzsche's abyss, the institutions that produce the dialogue start to stare back. But in showing where that stare aims, Gaddis also shows its blind spots, and through them, the potential for ameliorative change.

With this essentially optimistic reading, one of Tabbi's strongest achievements in *Nobody Grew* is showing how Gaddis's fiction extends and develops the widespread notion that the novel's great strength as a genre is its ability to give readers a sort of life in miniature. Tabbi's Gaddis gives the reader a sense of *hegemony* in miniature, of the ways economies, religions, and states *condition life* by codifying and promulgating their value systems upon the world: whether that be an attempt to "eliminate the very possibility of human failure as a condition for success in the arts" (209) in *The Recognitions*, a "new, hypertrophied capitalism" (11) in *J R*, or, across Gaddis's oeuvre, a rising "culture of simulation in which technology has become the only imaginable solution to problems it created in the first place" (211). In making small personal interactions with institutions resonate widely, Gaddis gives his readers a map to where and through whom American values change.

For the first time, *Nobody Grew* shows just how personal these lamented changes to American culture were for Gaddis. Through each of Gaddis's novels, Tabbi tracks specific quotes and conversations to moments and people in the author's life, while never reducing the literature to biography. Where a biographer might simply note where a passage in a novel echoes a lived experience, Tabbi also close reads what the passage says about Gaddis's life and the theme being scrutinized in the work. Particularly resonant amongst Tabbi's biographical findings is the debt Gaddis felt to his lifelong friend Martin Dworkin, many of the 1950s New York conversations with whom showed up across the text of *The Recognitions*, much to Dworkin's chagrin and to Gaddis's late-life feelings of guilt. Tabbi uncovers how one draft opening of *Agapē*

Agape began with Gaddis brooding on the death of his friend, and asking a kind of posthumous forgiveness. Keen to Gaddis's theme that art and life imitate institutions and vice versa, Tabbi shows how Dworkin's friendship shaped Gaddis's literary sense of the inextricability of authenticity, ownership, and chance. Similarly, Tabbi also reveals how Gaddis's father's complete absence in his adult life, as well as his grandfather's prowess in the world of music, came to inform a lifelong literary search for absent paternity and a solace in the musicality of speech. In both instances, Tabbi helps one understand Gaddis the man, his work, and how each informs the other.

Nobody Grew is structured around chapters exposing previously unknown or uncollected biographical material about Gaddis: his family history, his college failings and post-collegial wanderings, his stints at large American corporations and Bard College, his frolics and lifelong friends. While Tabbi subordinates his interpretations of Gaddis's literary themes to these biographical vistas, he is careful to show just how often Gaddis's life became his literature, and how much can be read anew in this light. But crucially, the biographical elements in *Nobody Grew* also help to show what Gaddis was not. In building up where Gaddis came from and tracking him down through his many wanderings as a twentysomething, Tabbi is also keen to sever him from the "recluse" camp of American writers like Pynchon and Salinger, into which he has often been forced. Where Pynchon and Salinger view(ed) their fiction and artistic output as in some way concomitant with their need to be out on the weirdos' wavelength or at home practicing devout religious rituals, respectively, Gaddis was more comfortable and visible in literature's social circles, and, as Tabbi shows, he was as much a figure within the corporate takeover of American life as he was one who wrote against it.

On this point of the writer's complicity, Tabbi seems to tacitly subscribe to Linda Hutcheon's view that postmodern art "offers a new model for mapping the borderland between art and the world, a model that works from a position within both and yet not totally within either, a model that is profoundly implicated in, yet still capable of criticizing, that which it seeks to describe" (Hutcheon 23). More so, Tabbi seems to affirm that it was in many ways because Gaddis "now had to work full-time at jobs he hated" inside America's postwar business machine after his first novel's

dismal sales, that he was so capacious and convincing in his ventriloquism of corporate cant (113). Yet of course no one forced Gaddis to join the some-would-say-evil companies he did—IBM and Pfizer—especially at a time when his more anti-corporate contemporaries were pulling stints at California hippie communes or at retreats of extended quasi-religious isolation. Contra Tabbi and Hutcheon, a writer like David Foster Wallace, for his final unfinished novel *The Pale King* (2011), was content to root out a 1980s IRS corporate manual, rather than actually work the job. While Tabbi might rebut that Wallace too was still inside what Mark McGurl would call “the Program,” and therefore as complicit in other ways, surely similar routes of outsider research were available to Gaddis as well, especially the Gaddis that Tabbi wants to hail as the predictor of and antithesis to the 2008 financial crisis. Yet while Tabbi does concede that Gaddis was not without some “blind spots” (83) as to his own complicity, he also provides one important through-line for understanding why this is so.

Fans of Gaddis will know from reading his work, as well as from the helpful notes compiled by Steven Moore and others at williamgaddis.org, that perhaps the writer he alludes to most is T.S. Eliot, and Tabbi’s biography, in spite of itself, shows just how deep such a conservative affinity ran. Tabbi is often out to prove Gaddis to be a sort of cultural whistleblower, an inside man able to show political progressives what they’re up against and where they must go. However, numerous facts conspire to the contrary. Tabbi affirms that Gaddis had a lifelong “conservative religious temperament” in spite of his staunch religious agnosticism (152). And when combined with Gaddis’s other fundamental beliefs that the writer should risk offense to the sensitive reader, mark “the decline of American values through imitation” (193), and even given Tabbi’s assessment that Gaddis was essentially a writer of didactic fiction who was out to “delight and instruct,” a portrait of the writer as all but Eliotic emerges. And while Tabbi stresses that Gaddis broke with Eliot’s worldview in rejecting the quest to recuperate “tradition”—indeed denouncing it as a sort of bad faith that refuses the truth of the present and the ineluctability of chance—he misses just how similar Gaddis’s corporate years are to Eliot’s banking years, where both writers saw themselves not as negating but as extending their writing through work in what Merve Emre would call “paraliterary institutions.” Both writers were often liberals

amongst conservatives and conservatives amongst liberals, upholders above all of upper-middle class values like “a strong work ethic” (17), the “desire to know” (20), and the belief in “literature as a conversation among similar minds” (33), and thereby opposing the growing twenty-first century progressive’s view that the arts must be a place of political assertions or biographically-grounded postures. Tabbi may have a claim, through Gaddis, that progressives these days have lost their way, but that claim doesn’t come by way of Gaddis’s supposed progressive vision. Instead, Tabbi’s postulation of a progressive novelist is undercut by his own dexterous biographical account of a lifelong moderate. To many Gaddis fans, and those wont to house him with other postmodern radicals out to topple the world system, a portrait of the man and his work as both politically liberal and aesthetically conservative—didacticist in literature, reformer in politics, and Samson-skeptic of religion—is happy cause to reassess and rethink where he (and by proxy, one) stands within/without said system.

Undoubtedly, through this first biography of the writer, Tabbi has done a service for all critics and fans of William Gaddis and American postmodern writing. *Nobody Grew* offers much new source material from the Special Collections at Washington University in St. Louis, where Gaddis’s papers are housed. Finally, the writer “famous for not being famous enough” has a definitive, well-researched childhood, adulthood, and old age grounded in historical fact. *Nobody Grew* thoroughly collates definitive information on the companies Gaddis worked for and the writers, critics, friends, and lovers he made his life with. In spite of this, the book still feels a bit compacted, each chapter reading like a standalone article. While this lets the reader choose almost any order if she is out to sample, the drawback is that the book comes off as repetitive to the very same patient reader Gaddis and Tabbi seeks, as each chapter repeats overall theses and anecdotes (for instance on the influences of Robert Graves and James Frazier).

As its largest drawback, Tabbi’s chronological, and hence progressive, rendering of Gaddis’s life fails to take into account how Gaddis looks, and appeals, to the reader in “our time” able to pick up each of his works and, reading them in a shorter span than it took Gaddis to compose them, to assess them as a continuous whole. From this vantage, Gaddis’s major theme seems to be what Protestant America continually

and comically places in its “God-shaped hole” at heart and in mind. Each of the novels suggests an answer that proved prophetic—transcendent art, the corporate pursuit of profit, repackaged and supercharged fundamentalist religion, or legal vindication. While Gaddis gave up on the first, and ironized the other three, the reader who chooses to act with or believe in some sense of personal meaning, else affirm a form of skepticism or nihilism, is therefore drawn to *The Recognitions*, the novel in the shadow of which Gaddis would write for the rest of his life. Though Tabbi shies away from it, that Gaddis’s most read, or most vaunted, novel is still *The Recognitions* is all to his point about the importance of Gaddis now: none of Gaddis’s protagonists gets farther out of one system imposed upon him (here his father’s Christianity) and into his own (here his art forgeries and sense of monastic commitment) than *The Recognitions*’ Wyatt Gwyon. Gaddis’s other four novels have more laughter, but far less prospects for change.

However, because the perception is that scholarly attention to Gaddis has stopped at his first work, Tabbi pushes on, trying to add critical steam, especially in the wake of the Occupy movement out of which he writes, to the value of works like *J R* and *A Frolic of One’s Own*. As I’ve noted above, this can skew the portrait of Gaddis farther than perhaps even Tabbi wants. Gaddis’s characters who embody and dissect the world of American business and the American judicial system often espouse a pessimism from which the novels show little escape or respite. Tabbi’s sense that one can read Gaddis like one might “read” these institutions, find their fissures and change the world, ends up finding too few answers within the texts to sustain the optimistic claims about those texts’ utility. Instead, as Tabbi explains, Gaddis and his characters find more in “outrage.” It is worth significant pause that *Nobody Grew* seeks to spin such outrage into, amongst a community of readers, something more grassroots political. One wonders if the 2015-now of Tabbi’s publication is still the same now post-2016. Gaddis’s realization that “nobody needed to teach the young outrage” because they were “outraged at everything” (180), now seems prophetic of events and institutions that Tabbi, like nearly all American pundits, hadn’t anticipated the subsequent shape of before November 9th, 2016. But Gaddis’s tepid hope in the voice of the isolated individual put through hell by the system, who

nevertheless remains rational if enraged, seems to have fallen out of earshot in the present whirlwind of arguing voices, in the Twitterverse that seems straight out of one of his novels. Or, writer of our times indeed, perhaps Gaddis's rage, the one he laughed at or the one he laughed with (who now can say?), is the whirlwind. He who's sown it, let him reap.

Nick Levey. *Maximalism in Contemporary American Literature: The Uses of Detail*. New York: Routledge, 2017. 175pp

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Nick Levey's study of literary "maximalism" "orbit[s] a proposed definition of the [maximalist] style, and theorizes connections between these texts and place, race, and gender" (Levey 4). Levey engages with Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, and Nicholson Baker's writing from multiple perspectives, and emphasizes maximalism as a mode of inquiry. This approach is in contrast to previous scholarship that has primarily focused on establishing the taxonomy of genre—for example, Steven Moore's *The Novel: An Alternative History* and Franco Moretti's *Modern Epic*—or that has described and analyzed the salient features within related works, like Tom LeClair's *The Art of Excess* and Stefano Ercolino's *The Maximalist Novel*. While these scholars have focused on issues like length, syntactic dexterity, mastery of information, and hybrid realism, Levey shifts the conversation toward the mind of the writer and reader. He claims the central concerns connecting all of the books are "a set of ideas about what writing and reading maximalist works allows a person to 'do.' To be organized, expansive, attentive, and polymathic to unusual degrees" (4). He incorporates scholarship from Richard A. Lanham, Bill Brown, Stefano Ercolino, and Richard Taruskin to argue that maximalism is a result of an education system within American consumer culture that produces self-conscious writers as well as readers who wish to fulfill their intellectual fantasies and reinvigorate their everyday life.

The first chapter speculates that readers of maximalist fiction use texts like *Gravity's Rainbow* to challenge their own "perseverance, patience, learning, erudition,

and intelligence" (39). By tapping into public opinion posted on the social media site *Goodreads*, Levey incorporates the perspectives of nonprofessional readers who often struggle through multiple attempts at completing the book. He proceeds to examine how Pynchon uses multiple domains of information to establish the lone author as a metaphorical "team of experts" (38). As a result, the novel becomes an educational tool that "offer[s] readers the right amount of motivation to persevere if the reading is to seem more than just hard labor," allowing Levey to infer that a maximalist text "makes people keen to persist with it beyond what they might otherwise feel is reasonable" (38). Levey supports this claim by addressing how readers of maximalism use guidebooks as a "testament to learning" (49). This points to how these authors intentionally encode texts in a way that welcomes the reader to actively quest for meaning with sources outside the text. While cognitive science has made significant gains in the understanding of how the mind responds to the challenge of reading literature, there isn't significant scholarship on whether maximalism in particular helps with patience, learning, or intelligence. Nonetheless, maximalism and its guidebooks may help readers *feel* that they have developed a sense of inquiry as a result of the genre.

Next, Levey connects the theme of gigantisms with the genre of maximalism by pointing to the scene in *Gravity's Rainbow* where Tyrone Slothrop and Geli Tripping are atop Brocken (a mountain located in Northern Germany). This scene occurs during sunrise which results in their shadows being cast across the valley below. The argument follows that this singular scene is "representative of the readers' experience of the novel" by connecting the reader to characters who are "small individuals no longer—that they have a giant reach, covering a wide landscape, able to hold the complexity of postwar Europe in their fists, unfettered by the usual constraints of human perspective and dimensions" (39). This image builds off the previous claim that focuses on the ways reading impacts how individuals feel about themselves, but it is questionable whether Levey should build a metaphor between the two characters from this one scene and all the readers of this genre. The analysis lacks a convincing explanation of this relationship. In the same scene, Tripping playfully dances while Slothrop raises his middle finger to the west and both end up enacting—or perhaps

participating in—sexual acts (Pynchon 335). Why not include these aspects in the analytical metaphor of reading maximalism? Levey's thinking fits into an unfair yet popular narrative that readers of maximalism use these “doorstops” only to feel superior to those who aren't up to the challenge of finishing these books. While this may be the case for some—how many is difficult to say— it would be unfair to generalize. It is equally fair to speculate that some are drawn to these books because of their playfulness and exuberance.

But what Levey's analysis gets right is how these books allow the reader to transcend “human perspective and dimensions.” Often this mode of writing deviates from the standards of psychological realism by using interlinked details to offer the reader something that transcends the limits of human perception—like the string of digressions about witches that includes Geli Tripping, Salem witches, and an allusion to the film *The Wizard of Oz*—which ties back to the Dorothy quote at the beginning of the third section, in which the Brocken scene belongs. The result is a sense of coherence through an omniscient narrative lens that is hyper-observant to details, digressive in a manner that creates paranoia, as well as playful in tone and emotional distance.

The second chapter turns the gaze from the reader to the author. Levey examines how creative writing in postwar America has shifted as a result of writers learning to read and write at universities, resulting in self-conscious writers who are “aware of what words ‘do’” and so are both “producers and analysts” of literature (Levey 57–8). He emphasizes David Foster Wallace's background as “a superstar student” who studied literature, philosophy, and mathematics before finding success in publishing and teaching. Levey argues that the opening of *Infinite Jest* “seems to generate within Wallace's writing a fantasy of failure, uselessness, and collapse that shows some degree of ambivalence about his reliance on the institutions that support fiction writers” (56). In this chapter Levey shows “why this novel is so interested in describing those moments of collapse, flunking, and failure” (60). He explores Wallace's “eagerness to ensure readers understand his work” with “a contradictory interest in those parts of a novel that fail to offer any clear sense of usefulness” (60). This theme continues into the third chapter when Levey examines Wallace's *The Pale King*, which

is “a novel about boring domains of life that at times sets out to be boring itself” (77). The scholarship in this section rightly points out that *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* can be studied as foils—one dealing with excessive pleasure and the other with excessive boredom. This focuses on the authorial management of information and how the inclusion of detail can lead to boredom, examples being tedious descriptions of tax law, accounting practices, and office bureaucracy (77). This critical approach fits well within Levey’s focus on unpacking the connection between maximalism and inquiry.

Levey briefly quotes Richard A. Lanham’s *Economics of Attention* in order to establish the importance of audiences managing the overabundance of information during a time when attention is in short supply. Unfortunately, Levey leaves out one of the central ideas from Lanham’s text, which argues that readers can both look *through* a text to focus on the substance of the book and look *at* the text to focus on the style. Lanham celebrates reading that oscillates between looking *through* and looking *at*. This theoretical approach can be used to explain when and why maximalism succeeds or fails. The maximalist mode calls attention to itself through non-standard use of language that directs the reader’s perception of details and how the narrator assembles meaning from those details. This is a byproduct of a group of university-educated writers who intensely explore how human perception impacts experience. Dealing with Lanham’s notion of oscillation would have strengthened Levey’s claims and provided insight into a reader’s economics of attention within the domain of texts that both entice *and* challenge readers.

A major question every critic of maximalism needs to address is: when does the genre’s warranted excess slip into purple prose? Levey critiques a moment in *The Pale King* when Claude Sylvanshine experiences “a syndrome called ‘Random-Fact Intuition’” (82). For example, when biting into a cupcake Sylvanshine instantaneously knows every detail that went into the creation of that cupcake, alluding to Proust’s famous madeleine moment. This data dump lacks the hysterical nature found in the opening of *Infinite Jest* because it lacks the mystery of Hal Incandenza’s communication problem and unique use of language. The passage from *Pale King* feels like a dump of data that doesn’t push the reader to experience a sense of

novelty. Here Levey successfully applies Lanham's notion of attention by addressing that most readers lack the stamina to address the passage's distinctive combination of dullness and complexity. Levey's analysis of these contemporary authors provides his reader with a means to better understand how individuals manage and value information by hypereducated individuals in an age of information (95). It also indirectly connects these contemporary authors with innovative writers of psychological fiction who explore the nature of mind, language, and storytelling—such as Laurence Sterne, Virginia Woolf, and Vladimir Nabokov.

In chapters four and five, Levey turns his attention to Nicholson Baker, who uses detail to reinvigorate everyday life (99). Baker tends to write short books about domestic and corporate life in consumer America, which stands in contrast to the mega-novels of Pynchon and Wallace. Levey argues that what unifies all three writers is how they use forms of inquiry predicated on the proliferation of details to dramatize the relationship between individuals and American consumer culture. By applying Bill Brown's notion of "thing theory," Levey explains how Baker creates saliency and meaning with broken objects. An example from Baker's book *Mezzanine* is a broken shoelace. Howie, the narrator, typically pays no attention to his shoelaces, but in a period of two days he breaks the laces on both of his shoes, which makes him think about the "vast system of variables [that] could have led to such an occurrence. The broken laces open out to a series of similarly overlooked relations and developments" (98). Levey reasons that writers can apply similar techniques that achieve different results by contrasting how Wallace's corporate fiction becomes excessively boring while Baker's use of detail transforms dull objects into those of intense interest (99). This focus on the use of detail offers scholars a new avenue in examining the relationship between substance and style in maximalism.

Finally, Levey draws a clear distinction between his project and Stefano Ercolino's *The Maximalist Novel*, which Levey describes as an analysis of maximalism as a literary genre, while his own work argues maximalism is a mode of inquiry. This can be observed in the book's introduction when Levey compares Gustave Flaubert's

description of a wall covered in paintings from *Madame Bovary* with a similar scene in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. As a realist who often pushed his precision towards maximalism, Flaubert limits himself to *Bovary's* vision and the common-sense laws of realism. By contrast, Wallace's catalog is not limited in its focalization, pushing the reader to experience a sense of estrangement through this over abundance. Levey appropriately applies the music scholarship of Richard Taruskin to literary texts by explaining, "Here maximalism is understood as the amplification and exaggeration of the contours and boundaries of traditional forms, which in the process produces somewhat non-traditional results" (7). This bending of realism exists within the realm of poetics, excluded from what Levey considers the central tenets of maximalism—organized, expansive, attentive, and polymathic.

To paraphrase John Steinbeck, a writer tries to explain the inexplicable and work at the impossible. This idea sheds light on how Levey uses the notion of inquiry within these maximalist writers. By pushing the boundaries of style, these writers strive to provide their readers with an experience that can't be directly experienced. This can be seen by the example of thing theory where a broken object seems to have a ripple effect throughout an entire system. Levey provides insight into why an individual would struggle with the inexplicable and impossible. The challenge provides an intellectual stimulation rarely found elsewhere in a contemporary culture shaped by consumerism—which ironically might be these book's most significant selling point. Instead of simply being objects, these books offer readers an opportunity to experience a quest for meaning which transforms readers from passive recipients of literature to participants in the creation of meaning. Maximalism brings to the foreground the idea that meaning is manmade and that one's ability to notice and use details has "the power to break *and repair* whatever objects, places, and relationships fall under its gaze, rendering visible their hitherto inconspicuous details in a manner that encourages a fuller, richer appreciation of the world of which they are a part" (99). The detailed languages used in these books are more than communicative devices. They express a way of interacting with the world—a way that encourages self-awareness, critical thinking, and persistence.

Joanna Freer. *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 208pp

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Joanna Freer's *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture* is a thorough study of how the 1960s and their various countercultural movements influenced Thomas Pynchon and his work, but also of how Pynchon reacts to these same movements. Freer deals specifically with how five major countercultural movements manifest in Pynchon's work: the Beats (whose influence Pynchon acknowledges in his introduction to *Slow Learner*), the New Left, the psychedelic movement, the Black Panther Party and the women's movement. Freer aims to rectify two flaws that she identifies throughout prior criticism: first, the argument that postmodern novels are not political and, second, that even though Pynchon's novels are indeed political they haven't been read as such as much as they could have been. While Freer sets a clear goal—providing new insights on how to read Pynchon's novels as not only a product of their era, but also a product of an author responding to an era—from the very beginning and meticulously works towards it, it is sometimes difficult to discern whether and where her analysis of the ideas within Pynchon books distinguishes between perspectives of Pynchon the author, the novels' narrators, or even Pynchon's characters.

While it is true that a loosely defined postmodernism can be said to abstain from politics, preferring introspection to engagement, and while any non-randomly generated list of postmodern authors will inevitably include (if not start with) Pynchon, this doesn't mean that Pynchon is not political (which he is) or that previous criticism hasn't recognized him as such (which it has). Freer, after all, includes a brief list of recent books and articles that engage with Pynchon's political side, including Samuel Thomas' seminal *Pynchon and the Political* (which she often quotes from). Furthermore, when power and authority have long been noted as predominant themes in Pynchon, it is difficult to be convinced that there is a lack of political analysis. Freer, however, is right to say that there are many political dimensions of

Pynchon's work that could have been analyzed and expanded on. Her book does so brilliantly; instead of focusing solely on Pynchon and his political inclinations, it follows Kathryn Hume's suggestion that more context around Pynchon's ideas is needed (Freer 3), and it accomplishes that by tracing lineages and influences that may have been suspected, but until now were rarely analyzed in the depth a book-length treatment allows.

Freer strikes the right balance between chronicling Pynchon's exchanges with the American counterculture of the 1960s (while always keeping in mind when each of his books was written) and analyzing flaws in Pynchon's politics that seem incongruous with the overall message that Pynchon wants his books to convey (though this framing is problematic, as I'll discuss further below). From the very start, Freer informs us that Pynchon's "work is innately anti-authoritarian" (1), but as the reader progresses through the chapters, she points out specific instances where his anti-authoritarian stance falters, as in his treatment of the women's movement (see below).

Freer has a firm grasp of the bibliography that has come before her and uses her knowledge both to enhance her argument and to contend with the interpretations of Pynchon's works that she finds lacking. She usually addresses Pynchon criticism in clusters before moving on to her own analysis, which draws less on that criticism than on primary texts by pivotal authors from within the critical 20th century movements that make up her "counterculture," like Timothy Leary and the beginning of the psychedelic movement or Betty Friedan and the (new) beginning of the women's movement.

Not all chapters in Freer's book are created equal. While she goes into significant depth when she examines the psychedelic and women's movements, she takes a slightly narrower view when she is looking at, for example, the Black Panther Party and its connection to the civil rights movement; or when the Vietnam war and the anti-war movement get passing references throughout the book, but not a chapter of their own; or when anarchism is bracketed by the psychedelic movement. It would be interesting to read her insights and see her research on such important parts of the 1960s and the American counterculture.

In the first chapter, where Pynchon's relation to the Beat movement is described, Freer does an excellent job at separating Pynchon's "Beat-like propensity to endorse 'alternative' lifestyles and to question established norms" (20) from his "painstaking, research-heavy approach to writing" that is "the virtual polar opposite of Kerouac's 'spontaneous prose' production myth" (21): a distinction that helps the reader understand clearly the limits of the counterculture's influence. The chapter focuses on *V.* (1963) and *The Crying of Lot 49* (published in 1966), however, which means that Pynchon did not have the benefit of hindsight about how the sixties would become what he calls them in a line (much cited by critics Freer herself builds on) from *Inherent Vice* (2009): "a little parenthesis of light" (254). But this lack of hindsight does not mean that Pynchon would accept uncritically the Beats' teachings; quite the contrary, in fact. Freer is very convincing when she concludes that "Pynchon perceived certain elements of the Beat attitude and approach [...] as naive, impractical, or misrepresentative of American reality" (37). In order for Freer to reach these conclusions, she goes beyond existing criticism that compares Pynchon to the Beats in passing,¹ and delves into specific Beat literature that allow her a better grasp of the times and the specific movement Pynchon writes about.

The second chapter focuses on the New Left and *Gravity's Rainbow* and examines whether the goals of the movement aligned with Pynchon's: ultimately Freer describes how Pynchon altered his stance on "activist violence across his first three novels," from being a skeptic, to accepting it, to choosing an "awkward middle ground" (56) in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Freer draws a lot on the example of Roger Mexico and Jessica Swanlake, the quintessential hapless couple in the pynchonian oeuvre. In *Gravity's Rainbow* their love is examined – and then rejected or, at least, defeated. In the end, Pynchon's solution seems to be, according to Freer, a kind of "guerilla pranksterism" (63), a term I hadn't heard before, and whose connotations make it a better choice than the narrow "culinary pranksterism" that Pynchon proposes in *Gravity's Rainbow* on the same page – 715 – on which Freer bases her conclusions.

¹ See Seed, for example, where the affinities between Pynchon and the Beats are more than acknowledged, but never really scrutinized.

The chapter on the psychedelic movement (an earlier version of which was published in Kolbuszewska) is one of the strongest in the book. While Freer engages with previous criticism that has recognized affinities between Pynchon and the movement, she digs deeper in order to find points of departure. Timothy Leary naturally features heavily in the chapter, but Freer's own reading goes beyond that and is oftentimes Frankfurtian, even though (by contrast to most recent Pynchon-and-Politics criticism) she doesn't cite specific Frankfurt School critics. She departs both from Samuel Thomas and Graham Benton, who advocate for the revolutionary potential of escapism in Thomas Pynchon's works. Her assertion that "fantasy can also be a means of uncritical escapism, channelling subversive desires into innocuous imaginings" (80) is reminiscent of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* on the culture industry: "The culture industry presents the same everyday world as paradise. Escape [...] is destined from the first to lead back to its starting point. Entertainment fosters the resignation which seeks to forget itself in entertainment" (113). Freer prefers to approach Pynchon through the French situationist, Guy Debord, whose *Society of the Spectacle* is in many ways a reimagining and a continuation of the Frankfurt School's teachings.

The Black Panther Party's relation to the Hereros in *Gravity's Rainbow*, as well as to the events described in "A Journey into the Mind of Watts," is the focus of the fourth chapter. While the Hereros have been thoroughly studied and the issue of race in America has started to become more prevalent in Pynchonian analysis lately,² it is rare for a Pynchon critic to examine race in the way Freer does, through the lens of black communities' attempts to define and assert *themselves*. Her starting point is Huey P. Newton's *Revolutionary Suicide* and the need for the black community, inspired by Marxist ideals, to come together and embrace self-sacrifice. "Revolutionary suicide converges with the truly heroic act" (113). That could have easily been a comment on the Hereros and their mission in the Zone that will (would) surely end up in death, but Freer informs us that Pynchon may not endorse such behavior (especially in the case of the Hereros, their reverence of the rocket is

² One example is "Race in Early Pynchon: Rewriting Sphere in V." by Luc Herman & John M. Krafft.

described but not approved) or, at the very least, that he may prefer exploring other avenues before resorting to martyrdom, since he “accepts violence not as a readily adopted means of self-aggrandisement but only as a despised last resort” (120).

The fifth and final chapter addresses the women’s movement, attempting to reveal “further facets of the author’s countercultural sensibility” (127) by focusing mainly on the role of women in *Vineland* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, as well as the later novels (excepting *Bleeding Edge*, which was published after Freer’s study was completed). Feminist readings are not new in Pynchon criticism,³ but Freer’s analysis, focused on social and political context, takes into account more than how female characters in Pynchon are treated. The most important part of this chapter is its final section that reveals “a potential flaw in Pynchon’s revolutionary writing project” (128). This project is political in nature and uses uncertainty and ambiguity to increase the readers’ awareness as regards to their position within society. And yet, when it comes to the depiction of women, Pynchon fails; Freer contends that Pynchon’s lack of understanding and the subsequent representations—or, rather, misrepresentations—of women are “counterproductive to his cause” (156).

But here, as I hinted earlier, lies this book’s greatest flaw: by assigning Pynchon’s books a programmatic nature, treating them as part of a potential political project with specific methods and aims;⁴ by basing much of her analysis on this assumption that Pynchon has a particular “cause” or goal, Freer also assumes a certain political position of Pynchon’s, even though there is no hint of it outside his literature. With the exception of the *Slow Learner* introduction (which Freer also convincingly criticizes) and a few notable defences of other authors’ artistic freedom, Pynchon has avoided publicizing his stance on political issues and social problems. A detailed analysis of the politics in Pynchon’s novels is only a hair’s breadth away from an

³ For an overview of gender-based Pynchon criticism, see Chetwynd, Freer, and Maragos, “Introduction,” p xvii–xxii.

⁴ Freer, for example, talks on about how representations of women in Pynchon’s work are “counterproductive to his cause” (156). While an educated guess about his political beliefs can be made (though it is impossible to tell how safe it is), it is even more difficult to surmise Pynchon’s cause, if any. Freer’s analysis of representations of women in the novels is very on point and does not require Pynchon to have *intended* anything specific.

educated guess of his own political attitude, something that can very well be compromised by our own projection of our beliefs on Pynchon. Freer's analysis of the countercultural movement within and without Pynchon's novels certainly advances the critical debate. And it can still do so without its attributions of the perspectives it diagnoses in the fiction to the author himself, who should never be confused with the persona that writes the books.

Matthew L. Potts. *Cormac McCarthy and the Signs of Sacrament: Literature, Theology, and the Moral of Stories*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. 224pp

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Matthew Potts's examination of the religious in Cormac McCarthy's fiction offers a much-needed expansion of previous critical engagements with the peculiar prevalence of spirituality in works of fiction which seems to so vividly chart the loss of meaning "in light of metaphysical collapse" (14). Much recent work that grapples with this paradox, Potts contends, is reductive, failing to "adequately theorize McCarthy's clear ambivalence around religion" in both religious and antireligious readings (1). In the light of Vereen Bell's existential reading of McCarthy's novels as rejecting religious belief but retaining a "pressure of meaningfulness" (qtd. p3), Potts claims that critics who emphasize the Christian undertones in McCarthy's work tend to oversimplify both McCarthy and Christian theology.

Potts's crucial intervention, then, comes in his focused attention to how sacramentality works as the main cohering agent between the existential, aesthetic, and religious thematics of McCarthy's later work (Potts focuses on the fiction from *Suttree* onward). The theology of sacraments, as Potts describes it, does not simply introduce "the holy into a profane world"; instead, it recognizes a "holiness embodied in the quotidian" (13). To Christian thinkers like Luther, Aquinas, and Wycliffe, Potts contends, "there is a sacredness in, with, and under the profane" (13). In light of this, sacramental actions intervene in a world of signs and signifieds by suggesting

a connection between action and meaning. Termed “visible words” by Augustine, sacraments are “signifying actions” that “do what they say”—in other words, “the sacramental sign effects the reality it signifies” (11). Thus, acts of love such as we see in *The Road* do not just indicate the father’s love for his son; they *are* that love. Potts thereby posits that occasional, performative acts of promise and forgiveness in otherwise dark novels like *No Country for Old Men* and *Blood Meridian* hold the possibility to change the constitution of the world and break its putatively inherent trends of violence.

And while Potts seems to at least superficially depart from sacrament for much of the middle chapters of the book, this focus returns in the final chapter, “Sacrament,” which excavates the role of the sacramental images that grace the pages of *The Road*. It is here that Potts’s use of critics like Judith Butler, Adriana Cavarero, and Hannah Arendt finally coheres with the diverse theological voices of Karl Barth, Hans Frei, and others to suggest that *The Road* develops an ethics that emerges from a Christ-like dispossession; that is, from the sacramental act of giving oneself over to others.

Potts devotes the first two chapters to *No Country for Old Men* and *Blood Meridian*, arguing that while McCarthy displays a strong skepticism against organized religion, he also builds a weighty critique of the instrumentalized reason we see utilized by those novels’ villains. Potts draws heavily on Nietzsche here, and his analysis corrects earlier Nietzschean readings of the villains of these novels. Though at first Judge Holden appears to resemble Zarathustra, Potts argues that in reality the Judge embodies the very religiosity Nietzsche critiques, recapitulating the ascetic ideal in his assumption of godhood and his worship of science and reason. Likewise, though on the surface Anton Chigurh of *No Country for Old Men* enacts a Nietzschean critique of morality, appearing to critics like Jay Ellis as “one more chanced event in the world,” in Pott’s reading of Chigurh ultimately defies the flat determinism he seems to champion (42). He finally “retains [his] agency” and unwittingly participates in a system of morality (42). Potts’s argument marks a significant turn from common understandings of McCarthy’s villains, which take Holden and Chigurh to be embracing a “postmodern groundlessness” (43). Instead, Potts claims, Holden and Chigurh end up becoming “narcissistic savants of metaphysical nihilism” rather than enlightened

Nietzscheans (50). Potts draws on Arendt to suggest that McCarthy's novels combat the villains' false determinism and willed violence through moments in which promise and forgiveness subvert the unpredictability and irrevocability of human action.

This is followed by an examination of the role of action in *Suttree*, which Potts takes "as a whole to be a critique of the spiritual rejection or replacement of material reality" (87). Though some critics have taken the novel's opaque narrative style either as a weakness or as a strategy to "mimic the manner by which blight and police brutality [objectify characters]," Potts contends that the corporeality of McCarthy's writing—the emphasis on embodied acts over interior thought—speaks to the externality of the human self and its realization through action (95). In this way, the externality of the narration in *Suttree* not only evokes Arendt's writings on action, but also Scripture, wherein descriptions of one's interiority are avoided such that one's actions appear to constitute the self. Here we begin to see more clearly how McCarthy's fiction seems to function under a sacramental logic: for Potts, human action in *Suttree* is not simply a sign of the self, it constitutes the self. In the same way, the sacramental sign "effects the reality it signifies" (11). Rather than suggest that the materiality of the worlds McCarthy constructs renders them wholly deterministic, Potts suggests that McCarthy's fiction ultimately preserves the possibility of human agency, and, by extension, ethics.

Potts then turns his attention to the significance of story in the Border trilogy, exploring further how narrative might serve "as a loose, shifting, but viable foundation for morality" (122). Arendt is again a significant voice in this discussion, as Potts uses the Border novels to illustrate the way narrative can function as an ethical force. What elevates his analysis, however, is his additional integration of Judith Butler's notion of an ethics of dispossession, as developed in *Giving An Account of Oneself*. Out of the "fundamentally dispossessing ethics" that emerges from the sort of storytelling we see in the Border novels, McCarthy advocates alongside Butler and Cavarero for the relationality and narratability of the self (144). The relationality that emerges from these stories facilitates a move toward ethics, Potts-through-Butler argues, because it exposes the way the self is necessarily implicated in the life of the Other.

The dispossession of the self plays an important role in the book's final chapter, in which sacramental theology moves from the background to the foreground of Potts's argument, and he relies on the repetition of images of Eucharist and baptism in *The Road* to signal the centrality of sacraments to McCarthy's project in the novel. Of particular importance to Potts is how the subjectivity of the father in *The Road* is realized through this self-dispossession, and evokes the self-emptying subject formation of Jesus Christ, who left his divinity for humanity, his humanity to become a corpse. Read as sacramental acts, these moments of dispossession *are* the love they signify. By ignoring—or simply failing to notice—the recurrence of these sacramental images throughout the novel, many critics have tended toward oversimplifying the relationship between the father and the son. For these critics, the allusions to Biblical or mystical narratives often serve as loose, nostalgic metaphors for a lost moral order. But for Potts, recognizing the sacramental quality of the father's self-dispossession enables a "more subtle reading, one which recalls the religious but without any hollow proclamation of redemption" (182). There is some hope to be found in the fact that the father's sacrifice is not a mere sign, pointing "beyond [itself] to some greater value"; rather, his self-dispossessing sacrifice "realize[s] that value" (172).

Potts intervenes in current McCarthy criticism by complicating previous readings that would subordinate his work's strange, distinctive spirituality to other, more purely aesthetic goals or qualities. Through expert harmonizations of theological, literary, and theological voices, Potts places the sacramental in conversation with the postmodern in a way that bolsters both and compromises neither. Further, the framework of sacramental theology that Potts delineates throughout expands and complicates the existential and aesthetic readings offered by critics like Vereen Bell and Jay Ellis by suggesting that McCarthy's work has not abandoned the search for an interpersonal ethics. In this way, Potts's book initiates a vital re-description of McCarthy's ethos, and lays the groundwork for more focused considerations of how the language and action of spirituality and religion occupy the narrative worlds he creates.

That said, the book does not attempt to resolve those ambiguities that McCarthy's work leaves unresolvable, and Potts's tolerance for the mystery and opacity that accompanies novels like *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *The Road*

speaks further to his ability to avoid the reductivism of purely religious or antireligious readings. The field of McCarthy studies will surely benefit from such a nuanced meditation as is found in Potts's work.

Lucas Thompson. *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. xiii + 271pp

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Lucas Thompson's *Global Wallace* is the first in a new series of "David Foster Wallace Studies" from Bloomsbury Academic. This is but the belated formalization of a pre-existing relationship—since 2012 Bloomsbury have published eleven volumes either entirely or substantially devoted to Wallace—but Thompson's book does represent a fresh break: it's the first book-length attempt to move away from Wallace Studies' sometimes too-narrow preoccupation with its subject as a uniquely *American* writer, influenced by, and responding to, other uniquely American writers, and to examine Wallace's either overt or covert – but crucially, as Thompson shows, one-directional – engagement with a significant number of non-US writers. Happily, despite a couple of missteps, it starts the new series off with clear-headed, well-researched criticism, which opens up Wallace to a wide range of new approaches and readings, and contributes to the recent, well-overdue course correction towards a Wallace criticism less "greatly shaped" by the "centrality of the essay-interview nexus" (Kelly 50, 49).

It has been evident for a while now how significantly Wallace's own views have influenced scholarly readings, but Thompson is the first scholar to so sustainably frame his work against that tendency. In particular, he challenges the extent to which Wallace's overtness about addressing "very American" ills (a phrase that appears on three separate occasions in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* [56, 64, 169]) and about positioning himself in relation to generations and schools of US writing, has tended to obscure his occasional, more straightforwardly laudatory, less self-conscious references to non-US writers.

Thompson doesn't always steer away from alignment with Wallace's "own conception of his work" (4): Wallace himself publicly professed a strong interest in many of the writers that Thompson examines—Kafka and Dostoevsky, for example.⁵ Thompson's discussion of Dostoevsky (93–106) is an invaluable addition to Timothy Jacobs' earlier comparative study; his exploration (150–54) of Wallace's "Kafkaesque version of comedy" via "literalization" (152) is less convincing, perhaps owing too much of a debt to Wallace's own "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed."

Such caveats aside, however, Thompson, greatly aided by his research in the Wallace archive at the Harry Ransom Center, opens up the field of Wallace's influences in ways that are often both unexpected and, in retrospect, embarrassingly obvious (the present reviewer met the revelation that Wallace's short story "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature" is a "complicated parody/homage" of/to Flannery O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge" with a Homer Simpson-esque "D'oh!").

My identifying the O'Connor argument as the epitome of what the volume does well should raise a readerly eyebrow: isn't the subject of the volume "Wallace and *world* literature"? To answer this question, let me turn to Thompson's core argument, and his resultant method.

Thompson's argument is *not* that we should be looking to Wallace for any kind of comparative- or world-literary approach in the Dimock, Damrosch, Moretti or Spivak vein. On the contrary, Wallace is an "Emersonian pragmatist" (46), interested not in exploring alterity (cultural, ethnic, etc.), but in *universalizing* experiences that he can apply to his investigations of the American context, and who therefore looks to non-US texts as sources of conceptual/philosophical approaches and literary techniques that can help revitalize US writing.

This appropriative approach is "out of step with current scholarly models", as Thompson politely notes (14), adding that Wallace's "engagements with world

⁵ I would have welcomed, for example, more on Julio Cortázar, whose experiments with narrative seem to me one of the great undervalued influences on Wallace's own.

literature...tended to reinforce his own cultural and historical perspective, in what Damrosch would deride as 'a self-centered construction of the world'" [13].⁶ Thompson, then, doesn't present Wallace as a paragon of worldliness, but argues (correctly, in my view) that neither can he be relegated to an exclusively "national" literature. Instead, he reads Wallace's work as an example of what Damrosch calls "localized globalism" (238), aiming, in alignment with recent transnational readings of authors such as Austen, Dickinson, and Woolf, to "dislodg[e] Wallace from a particular strain of national, patriotic criticism" (Kundera's "small context") and "open up complementary ways of reading" his work in an expanded, Kunderian "large context" (11).

Thompson presents his material in five chapters, each examining Wallace's work in relation to one of "five broadly construed geographic territories – Latin America, Russia, Eastern Europe, France, and Africa" (20). In each chapter, Thompson presents evidence of Wallace's interest in writers or texts from one of these territories, reveals references or allusions to these texts in Wallace's own works, theorizes a model of influence specifically for those works, and demonstrates that model via analysis of a "particularly salient representative of the tradition" (19). The five models employed are, respectively:

- "the writer as a software programmer, scrambling and rewriting previous textual codes" (43)
- the forebear "functioning as 'a hologram'" (a metaphor invoked by Wallace in relation to Dostoevsky), their work serving as a "transparent overlay...for Wallace's text" (44)
- the forebear as a "touchstone.... against whom [Wallace] could assess the value and success of his own work" (160)

⁶ I am reminded of Christopher K. Coffman's astute observation that, unlike someone like William T. Vollmann, who "offers figures that provoke discomfort while simultaneously demanding engagement...[with] neither an assumption of commonality nor...of compatibility," Wallace mostly gives us figures that are "like us in essential ways" (14). In a partial defence of Wallace, Lee Konstantinou argues that he "turns his narrowness of focus" into an "exploration"/"performance" of the deficient cosmopolitanism of his socio-political and ideological "location" (67, 70).

- the Bloomian *tessera* (the antithetical completion of a precursor through “reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense” [Bloom 14]), though with the attendant anxiety “emptied... out” (Thompson 195)
- the writer as “hip-hop sampler, building *bricolage*-like narratives from a variety of cultural sources” (45).

On the positive side, this approach allows for a very clear demonstration of the wildly eclectic manner in which Wallace is (and sees himself as) influenced by particular writers and texts, and the very deliberate way in which he incorporates *particular* influences into his own work with very *particular* goals in mind. Thompson’s pairing of writers with models of influence proves especially useful, allowing him to present a series of comparative case studies that do justice to the complexities and variety of Wallace’s work and to deal with a wide range of dissimilar forebears without attempting to force disparate material together in an (inevitably) reductive manner.

On the negative side: a minor issue (and one that would be hard to deal with satisfactorily, given the nature of the project) is that there are inherent limitations to such a repetitious structure, inasmuch as there is no larger argument being developed or qualified throughout the volume, which essentially resets in each chapter, moving on to a new geographic territory, presenting more evidence for Wallace’s idiosyncratic appropriative practices, then moving on to the next one, etc. This issue is also in part a natural consequence of Thompson’s use of those different theoretical models which, while complementary, cannot finally be synthesized into some kind of overarching theory, since they are not in any sense theoretically derived *from within* or in *critical response* to the literatures they are associated with; rather, they represent historical accidents in terms of Wallace’s method at particular times/with particular texts.

So there isn’t necessarily any generalizable applicability to be found in Thompson’s method, then, but this, finally, strikes me as entirely appropriate. Not in any “down-with-theory” sense: Wallace is convincingly shown to be borrowing from *specific* writers to achieve *specific* effects, and his engagement with his influences is

to be found sometimes more at the level of literary craftsmanship (for example in the case of Puig, the political specificity of whose work, as Thompson notes, Wallace simply ignores [66]), sometimes at the level of their philosophy of fiction, with the engagement in the latter case being sometimes adulatory (Dostoevsky), sometimes more critical/parodic in nature (O'Connor). A critic would be, I think, very hard-pressed to synthesize all of this into any one meta-model.

There is however a more significant criticism to be made – the one that O'Connor's name has been signalling all along. Some of the five geographical territories that Thompson investigates are much more broadly construed than others: Latin America, Russia, and Eastern Europe are represented by writers from these particular territories (granted, with all the inevitable questions regarding whether they can be taken to be fully representative of the literary modes of entire regions). But what of France and Africa?

As the title of the fifth chapter indicates ("French Existentialism's Afterlives: Wallace and the Fiction of the US South"), and despite the fact Wallace was "familiar with a wide range of French writers" (8), Thompson chooses to focus on "a particularly powerful version of American existentialism being played out in Southern, Catholic literature," where writers such as O'Connor and Walker Percy "demonstrat[ed] how continental philosophy might be transposed into a US setting" (170).

Thompson's justification for this focus – that from Wallace's unwaveringly Midwestern point of view, the South was "in effect a foreign territory... so alien and estranged that its fiction represented... a kind of pseudo-world literature" (22) – surely overstates the case and contradicts the (convincing) premise that these writers were of interest to Wallace *precisely* because they "Americanized existential philosophy" (170). Furthermore, Catholicism's centrality in their works—which Thompson rightly sees as relevant to Wallace's "own complex response to the Christian faith" (22)—means that the more atomized existentialism being examined is far removed from the atheist, often actively anti-religious, and *politicized* French existentialism in whose "political implications," Thompson admits, "Wallace was not particularly interested" (193). Again, while this is entirely appropriate to the kind of writer Wallace is, it stretches the concept of "world literature" a bit too far.

As does, to a much greater extent, the volume's penultimate chapter, and most significant misstep ("African-American Appropriations: Race, Hip-Hop, and Popular Anthropology"), in which Thompson focuses on Wallace's "slightly odd perspective on race and ethnicity" (22), via an analysis of his most notoriously problematic non-fiction text (*Signifying Rappers*) and brief examinations of his "often curious depictions of race" in *Infinite Jest*, *The Pale King* and *Oblivion*. Thompson's discussion of Wallace's engagement with popular anthropology (notably Joseph Campbell) feels at times forced, and somewhat lacks the specificity and complexity evident in previous chapters – though I wonder whether this may also have to do with his addressing one of the weakest aspects of Wallace's work, as well as the shift to non-fiction influences (Thompson elsewhere shows Wallace to be at his best when he granularly reworks fictional texts). But more importantly, this chapter comes closest to conflating the cultural production of an (already too-broad, in the case of a generalized "Africa") geographical territory with its (deciding) influence on a specifically American subculture.

This doesn't finally detract from the overall significance of this inspiring volume, which pushes Wallace studies in exciting, long-overdue directions, away from the field's heavily US-centric approach, and complicates long-held ideas about Wallace's influences that have often kept the conversation circling around the same few (key) figures. Bloomsbury's series is off to a great start and this reader for one anxiously awaits its next instalment.

**Robert Roper. *Nabokov in America: On the Road to Lolita*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 354pp and
Anna Pilińska. *Lolita between Adaptation and Interpretation: From Nabokov's Novel and Screenplay to Kubrick's Film*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015. 140pp**

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Robert Roper and Anna Pilińska add two new mixtures of factfinding and analysis to our understanding of Vladimir Nabokov's American years, and particularly of what

these contributed to his most famous novel. We might doubt whether anything new *can* be said on the topic: Brian Boyd has already dedicated the second volume of his Nabokov biography to those American years, with access to the archives granted by Nabokov's widow, Véra. Boyd asserts that Nabokov's American decades, his forties, when he roamed America's West summer after summer, discovering species of butterfly and moth, were "the most thrilling years of his adult life" (4), and traces their influence on the fiction. Stacey Schiff's *Véra* offered another perspective on the author, focusing on his marriage and the impact it had on his work, with an emphasis on these same years.

But as Roper insists, there was something more that influenced and shaped Nabokov's writings during the 1940s and 50s, and that was America: the family's new country and home. It was during that period that Nabokov was facing what he called his private tragedy, abandoning his natural idiom "for a second rate brand of English" (1991: 327). After forty years of inventing Russia and Western Europe, he was now, as Roper quotes a *Playboy* interview, "faced by the task of inventing America" (115): creating American worlds from scratch through his fiction. This required an immersion in American life, and it's this process that Roper's book aims to narrate, explain, and ground new understanding of the fiction on. He stipulates that "this book is an attempt to borrow Nabokov back from the scholars" (7), aligning himself with common readers, trying to get at this great author through the facts, without obscuring the texts behind the endless fossicking done by other scholars. The same principle applies to Pilińska's book, which also aims to balance accessibility to those unfamiliar with the previous long bibliography of Nabokov scholarship with new information on the novel and its adaptations that could enlighten even the professional scholars.

Roper's cover depicts Nabokov—who Véra drove everywhere—alone in his two-door Buick, taking notes and writing. Although he is not in his legendary Oldsmobile—the car he also had Humbert Humbert drive—and the photo is not from one of his many road trips to the West but was actually staged closer to home in New England (by the photographer Carl Mydans, for *Life*), the image still impels us to see Nabokov's American travels as *work*, and to follow him on this American journey and new life. Roper opens by *very* briefly summarizing the last few years before Nabokov's

immigration to the United States without any mention of his early life or to his previous writings. The chronological narration begins with Nabokov, Véra and their son Dmitri settling in the States in search of a safer life: within a few pages, Nabokov has arrived at Manhattan, and the narration of the twenty year American interval (1940–1960) begins. After the initial years of financial struggle, Nabokov manages to establish his career as a writer, translator and lecturer. His productivity was raised during the second decade of the American period. He took five years to write *Lolita* as he was concurrently translating Pushkin, teaching at Cornell and constantly traveling. The great popularity and financial success of *Lolita* lead him to decide to return to Europe in order to dedicate himself to writing and be close to his son.

Whereas Roper narrates the American years teleologically toward *Lolita*, Pilińska's slim book with the long title and *Lolita-esque* hot pink cover focuses on *Lolita* alone, albeit in a comparative study and analysis of three versions: Nabokov's original novel, his screenplay later published as *Lolita: A Screenplay*, and Stanley Kubrick's film of the novel, which drew on Nabokov's script but developed far beyond its confines in the process of shooting. As the title suggests, the latter's final product oscillates between faithfulness to the screenplay and re-interpretation of the novel. While comparisons between novel and film are common among Nabokov scholars, Pilińska's analysis through the mediation of Nabokov's own screenplay has barely been attempted before, and leads to fresh insights. She explicitly shares Helman's (1998) idea that, in general, adaptations encourage the viewers to reach for the original source of a given story, but in practice, she has most to tell us about the adaptations.⁷

Roper too aims to illuminate the novel *Lolita*—in this case America's contribution to it—while in practice much of his most fascinating material is tangential to it: the simple description of Nabokov's traveling and road trips, for example, is one of the highlights of the book. Roper has assembled very careful and detailed research following the Nabokov family itineraries, using their diaries and letters. He estimates

⁷ Strangely, though Pilińska's own first contact with Nabokov and *Lolita* was not through any of the texts she examines here but rather Adrian Lyne's 1997 film of the novel, Lyne's adaptation doesn't feature at all in her book. One wonders what a fourth text for comparison might have helped clarify about the three she deals with.

that they traveled 200,000 miles during the twenty-year period, whether in search of butterfly specimens or just in familiarizing themselves with the country and the lifestyle. Roper, impressively, did much of this himself: he traveled several thousand miles looking for their traces, photographing and presenting the motels and the cabins where they had stayed, interviewing people who saw them and remembered them, trying to discover the things and experiences that influenced Nabokov and inspired him. *Lolita* was a fruit of these experiences, as Nabokov uses places and sceneries from those trips: Roper catalogues these in greater detail than anyone before him. *Lolita* has been characterized as the best travel book ever written about America, and Roper's recapitulatory travelogue, with close factual examination of the traces found in the novel, is enlightening. Yet, as Roper admits, visiting those places and seeing what Nabokov had seen, did not contribute as much to his understanding of the novel as his simultaneous deep and intensive rereading of Nabokov's books.

He also, and with similarly tangential-to-*Lolita* and similarly interesting-on-their-own-terms results, draws on his archive to offer an insight into Nabokov's friendships and relationships with scholars, editors, critics and other writers. The reader witnesses through Nabokov's letters and correspondence the rise and fall of his friendship with one of his era's foremost literary critics, Edmund Wilson, and the contribution of Morris Bishop to the establishment of his early career, along with the publishing process of his books and their reception.

Pilińska's study does not rove so far: it consists of four chapters, all about *Lolita*, with themes and research results that occasionally overlap. The first chapter focuses on the plot as presented by Nabokov, both in the novel and in his own screenplay (which he wrote at Kubrick's request, having initially refused). The chances are that the reader of this book is already familiar with the novel's plot and wouldn't need such a long recapitulation as Pilińska gives, especially as she offers little explanation for emphasizing some aspects and leaving out others. The subsequent comparison of the novel to Nabokov's original screenplay, which focuses on the differences between them, is much more useful.

Although Nabokov was credited as the movie's writer, only 20% of his screenplay was finally used by Kubrick. The director's version and changes are the topic of

the second chapter, which I found by far the most interesting. Pilińska successfully attempts to provide a background of the film-making process, traces the motives behind the script's adjustment, and examines the reasons for individual changes, from the unfaithfulness in the director's subjective view, to the technical limitations, the improvisational talents of the cast and, last, the need to avoid censorship. These interacting factors can be traced even in the film's first scene: Kubrick places the end of the novel, Quilty's murder by Humbert, at the beginning, making it more about a rivalry between them than a seduction story with a minor. The actors made some changes, too. The ping pong table was a James Mason's idea, whereas Quilty's absurdity and surreal actions were Peter Sellers' improvisation. The well-researched narration of events during the shooting that led to unexpected changes are one of the highlights of the book.

Chapter Three aims to approach the differences that the four main characters of the novel undergo in the three texts. As the author's main method to achieve this is through various juxtapositions and comparisons between versions, much of this chapter overlaps with chapter two, with inevitable repetitions and redundancies that are not all redeemed by the reframing in terms of character.

The fourth and last chapter investigates the theme of intertextuality within the novel and how this is conveyed to the script and the final movie product. It begins with a literary review on the notion of the intertextuality and the definition of the term, followed by a brief analysis of the intertextuality of *Lolita*, both of which seem aimed above all at readers unfamiliar with the material. Given the intrinsic difficulty and limitations of tracing literary intertextuality in film adaptations, Pilińska's examination of allusions and references found in the two scripts is uneven. There are long analyses of references that have however been already fully analyzed in prior scholarship—such as those to Edgar Allan Poe or Mérimée's *Carmen*—and too much simple name- and title-dropping with no further examination and reasoning.

Roper's aims of advancing on the existing literary research are more consistent, but still essentially incomplete. Roper researches the writers that might have influenced Nabokov and the conscious incorporation of American style and tradition—even some real American history, occurrences, and cases—in Nabokov's fiction.

Unlike Pilińska's occasional perfunctoriness, Roper seems to spend too much effort on interpreting Nabokov's American writings through comparisons with other works of fiction. Naturally given his topic, only the American inspirations are taken into account, leaving aside Nabokov's European and Russian background and readings. Even the most obvious intertexts, such as the German short story "Lolita," are never mentioned, and other literary influences are ignored in an attempt to demonstrate the determinant role of his new country in his work and lifestyle. The emphasis on America thus entails an incomplete understanding of "The Road to *Lolita*."

When it comes to the American influences, Roper shows that American fiction and writers changed and shaped Nabokov's new literary self, but I find some of the juxtapositions and comparisons not to be totally convincing: for example, those with Herman Melville and J.D. Salinger (Roper claims to find a template for Lolita in Holden's teenage sister in *The Catcher in the Rye*). A lot of emphasis is placed on citing long novel extracts aiming—sometimes quite forcedly—at demonstrating the influence that Nabokov had either received by American literature or given to American writers. Roper also addresses Nabokov's opinion on various American novelists, mentioning how much he used to disdain William Faulkner and had difficulties realizing the importance of Ernest Hemingway: an opinion that Roper does not defend. Remarkably, though Roper insists on being a proud Nabokovian, moved by his writings since a very young age, he avoids a hagiographic portrait of the great author and consistently disagrees with Nabokov's own judgments. Roper does not hesitate to share his personal opinions, to side against Nabokov in his debates or arguments with others, or even to criticize him regarding his family affairs. He also shares his contrasting opinions on authors that Nabokov did not appreciate much. This is refreshing, though it doesn't always tell us much more about Nabokov.

Both books contribute to the further understanding and investigation of *Lolita*, both the novel and the movie. Pilińska offers an easy but interesting reading on the comparison of the three different versions. The most new and interesting material pertains to Nabokov's script, the film making process, and the various factors including and exceeding Nabokov's two texts that led to the final movie. This is material any Nabokov scholar will benefit from. Outside chapter two, the book's less

consistent sense of audience—unfamiliar novice or expert Nabokovian—makes its material on character and intertextuality insufficiently developed for more familiar readers and scholars. Roper's deeply researched book adds new factual material to the abounding bibliography on Nabokov, and is clear about the extent if not the exact nature of the impact the United States had on him, especially through his trips to the West. The comparisons of Nabokov to American authors, however contrary to Nabokov's own distaste for being compared to others, can always be interesting and valuable to those in search for further and supplemental information on the writer. And although these moments sometimes seem to betray Roper's intention to write for non-academics who don't want to get bogged down in minutiae, they add up to a strong case for America's influence on the novel. The two books together collate vital new historical information that offers fresh, valuable insight into Nabokov's life and the creation of *Lolita*: they also, more sporadically, offer interpretative arguments that also advance our understanding.

Jeffrey Severs. *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. 311pp

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A challenge facing anyone who hopes to tackle the full body of David Foster Wallace's work is determining a comprehensive thread to unify his literature. Most often this thread concerns his complex relationship with postmodern literature: the competing nods to and fratricide of his predecessors such as Barth and Pynchon in his early work, followed by the development of a style now most commonly labeled "New Sincerity" in his later works. Jeffrey Severs aims to provide something more concrete in *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books: Fictions of Value*. His subject, economics, may at first blush strike one as unusual or even counter-intuitive. Sure, *The Pale King* is immersed in the world of accounting and Wallace is certainly noted for his critique of consumerism (notably in *Infinite Jest*, *This is Water*, and "A Suppos-

edly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again"), but scholars have tended to take a primarily psychological or spiritual approach to these settings and themes, framing them in relation to Wallace's concern with "addiction thinking" or "boredom." Severs' "value-centric" approach shifts attention away from the individual and toward social, communal, structural frameworks. He argues that Wallace's fiction consistently explores the conflict that, not so much individuals but, perhaps more importantly, society, creates between how money and morality are used as competing means of defining "value."

"Value" is an elastic term and in lesser hands using it to bring all of Wallace's work under one umbrella might lead to slippery or careless application. But Severs directly acknowledges the term's broad interpretive range, and further, builds his argument around Wallace's play among the dialogic nature of the word's meaning: "Wallace took seriously the fact that we use the same word for the enumerated and the seemingly incalculable – values- without suggesting that the two could ever be merged... But economic, monetary, mathematically, semantic, aesthetic, and moral meanings of value all interact here" (10).

Each of Severs' chapters examines one of Wallace's novels and story collections in relation to one of these realms of value. The chapter on *Broom of the System* focuses on work, examining how humans create, consume, and share value. Via *Girl with Curious Hair* Severs makes the compelling claim that the "origin" of Wallace's "fictional ethos" is not the later twentieth century, but rather the stock market crash of 1929 as he turns his attention toward New Deal thinking and civic engagement (64). His chapter on *Infinite Jest*, titled "Dei Gratia," explores work ethic, setting Don Gately apart as an example of an exception to addiction, elevated by grace. *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* tacks toward a mathematical interpretation of value as relationships between people are viewed, perilously, as formulas or equations. He views *Oblivion* as a lament of the passing of traditional family values and a rejection of the "genius" who makes labor effortless. Finally, *The Pale King* is read as an engagement with moral and civic values through ritual and an investigation of America's movement from a production model of value to a consumption model. So while particular chapters highlight one approach to value and sublimate another, attention to

both qualitative and quantitative definitions appears throughout, with the primary focus being axiological.

Notwithstanding the different forms of value, the chapters cohere around the ideas of interpersonal “currency,” civic engagement, and the individual’s contribution to the whole, or as Severs puts it, “the symmetries between impoverished inner economies and the world with which they were symbiotic” (251). In that sense, Severs’ study bears a resemblance to much existing scholarship that investigates Wallace’s fascination with overcoming solipsism and the dangers of consumption. Severs is aware of this and argues, rightly, that such readings are accurate but limiting. His book offers more. Too often scholars frame Wallace through his 1993 essay “E Unibus Pluram” and his interview with Larry McCaffrey in that same year. Severs calls for “more reading of the tales against the teller’s precepts” (5). Indeed, much previous Wallace scholarship hangs on his assertion that fiction functions as a means of combatting loneliness, and in that light invests much in exploring the relationship between Wallace and the reader. Such an approach limits our comprehension of Wallace’s concerns and influences; as Wallace muses “what it means to be a fucking human” (McCaffrey 26) our attention is primarily drawn to his biography and to the techniques he uses to convey individual human experience. Severs’ book valuably provides a peek behind “the author as rhetorician” (5) and rather provides a historicized view that gets out from under the shadow of the sometimes deified Wallace persona in order to read him instead as a citizen acutely interested in political and social questions. An advantage to this approach is that we begin to read the characters as citizens too; Severs suggests that we ask of each character: “[W]hat job does he have, if any? How hard does he work.... What value has he earned or produced?” (23). I found myself taking Wallace’s characters, even those (maybe especially those) absurd personalities from early works, more seriously, seeing them as more human and less literary invention thanks to this investigation.

Since Wallace studies is still an emerging field there is not a large body of scholarship to pad the bibliography, though this book does display a deft engagement with current Wallace scholars. The primary mechanism of Severs’ argument, and what makes the book such a thoughtful and convincing contribution, is sustained, keen

close-reading. He dives deeply into all of Wallace's fiction. And while it is true that the chapters addressing *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King* are the longest, lesser works such as *Girl with Curious Hair* are given due diligence. Further, he explores the entirety of the story collections; "Lyndon" and "John Billy" are covered, not just the critical favorites such as "Little Expressionless Animals" and "Westward the Course of Empire Makes it Way." Severs' reliance on close reading can have dangerous consequences. Occasionally it seems that he overreaches in his interpretations, particularly in the attention given to names and initials. While Wallace did take a cue from Pynchon in this regard, I had trouble seeing Leonard Stecyk's name broken down into "Ste. – cyk" or "sick saints," for example (121). This instance was rather incidental, one small bit of evidence among a larger argument about "gifts and giving." But other instances, such as the association between Don Gately's initials and "Dei Gratia," a shortening of the Latin "Dei Gratia Regina Fidei Defensor" found on British currency (113) is asked to bear more weight, since Severs builds his *Infinite Jest* chapter around the claim that "Gately is the exception to the novel's ethos of addiction, despair, and disembodiments" (89) and is raised by "the grace of God." To be fair, Severs does acknowledge the impression of improbability ("These initial-based readings might seem mere coincidences..." (113)) and the subjectivity of his own reading ("if my DG association is correct..." (114)), but nevertheless, some readers will find themselves pushing back against his exegesis. Personally I found the bulk of his interpretations reasonable and not a detriment to his overall argument.

Monographs like *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books* are exactly what Wallace studies needs at this juncture. It has been fifteen years since Marshall Boswell's *Understanding David Foster Wallace* was published and those years have provided a wonderful foundation, including Stephen Burn's *Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide* and his interview collection, *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, D. T. Max's biography, and a number of very fine collections of essays. A good portion of this groundwork consist of guidebooks and resources: the necessary tools for building further research. Other early scholarship makes an argument for Wallace's place in the canon. But Severs proceeds from the question, "[w]ith his canonization increasingly secure, where will the legacy of Wallace take literature, in the United

States and among his many disciples around the globe?" (251). I agree that the time has come to move away from examining Wallace qua Wallace and delve more deeply into reading him as illustrative of and formative in the shaping of larger movements in literature and culture. Severs' examination of Wallace's "fiction of values" helps us to move beyond reading his writing as simply a response to his literary predecessors, and further, sheds light on Wallace's central, unlikely balance of postmodern style and traditional values. In this light, Severs makes an argument in the same vein as the push towards "sincerity" in Wallace scholarship, but goes a step further in boldly identifying him as an old-fashioned moralist, distinct from his peers but also setting the tone for a slightly younger generation of writers including Zadie Smith and Dave Eggers.

Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge. *Reading Capitalist Realism*. University of Iowa Press, 2014. 272pp

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I read and will comment on the present collection of essays as one of an ever-growing number of publications in literary/cultural studies which hold steadfast to the conviction that fictional narratives, in whatever form they appear, continue to help us understand our world. In a situation in which humanistic knowledge is becoming more and more marginalized this steadfastness is a defensive gesture. In saying this I am not disparaging the gesture but merely setting the broader context in which to evaluate it. Working with literary texts and cinematic productions, the authors gathered here engage extant knowledge and the archive but do so in order to purportedly make sense of the conjuncture in which they are writing. That conjuncture, in my opinion, is marked by the centrality of the economic *problématique*: the way that issues of money and finance have insinuated themselves into all aspects of human existence. After a few remarks on Shonkwiler's and La Berge's collection I will go on to ask how the book takes up the challenges of the present and to what extent, as

Richard Dienst writes in the afterword, it helps us “grasp the circumstances in which we find ourselves today” (248).

In the introduction the editors attribute the term *capitalist realism* to Mark Fisher’s celebrated 2009 book of that title, and contend that it demands “further elaboration,” stating that the aim of their volume “is to open up the term in its political, economic, and aesthetic dimensions” (2). For purposes that will become clear below I give another quote: “A quarter of a century further into the dialectic of financialization and commodification, capitalism has intensified its claim on its established terrain and further foreclosed upon imaginable alternatives” (3). After an interview between Fisher himself and Jodi Dean, the essays in the first section of the book, titled “Novelistic Realisms”, explore the transformations of realist poetics as it deals with contemporary capitalism. The second section of the book, “Genres of Mediation,” offers essays dealing with the commodification of visual and nonfictional genres under the reign of neoliberalism. The third section, “After and Against Representation,” gathers a number of theoretical explorations that ask whether literary representation itself has not already failed. The readings the volume provides exemplify how a concept such as capitalist realism can be employed to explore textual intricacies and how vice-versa these explorations add weight to the concept. As such the collection of essays fulfills what it set out to do, and exemplifies what we literary scholars ought to be doing in search of a place for literary knowledge amidst present epistemological quandaries. But what if we refocus our attention from the literary and take up the question of capitalism itself?

As theoretical framework, Fisher’s concept enables the assembled readings, but in such a way that they replicate all of its ambiguity and blind spots. Rereading for present purposes Fisher’s original text, I contend that Fisher was back then working towards a definition of a stage of capitalism rather than actually providing one. For example, neither the term “widespread sense” nor the phrase “pervasive atmosphere” he used in *Capitalist Realism* exemplify any kind of analytic rigor. Nevertheless, the inchoate term gained currency. In the conversation between Dean and Fisher himself which opens the present volume, Fisher is more specific. I quote from the interview:

One way of thinking about capitalist realism is as a belief that capitalism is the only viable political-economic system – that other systems may be desirable, but capitalism is the only one that works. Another way of getting to capitalist realism is thinking of it as an attitude in relation to this – a feeling of resignation: there's no point struggling, we just have to adapt. But there are problems with conceiving of capitalist realism in either of these two ways because they suggest individual psychology, when what we are talking about is more like a transpersonal psychic infrastructure. It's ideological, not in the sense that it directly persuades people of the truth of its propositions, but more because it convinces people that it is an irresistible force. (26–27).

Although more articulate than the original description of capitalist realism there is still I think a lack of rigor here. Using Fisher's terms, I opine that more effort should have been put by authors engaged on the project that brought forth the volume into defining both the "system" and its "force." If this had been done an "infrastructure" that is other than psychic, either in the individual or the transpersonal sense, would have insinuated itself into the discussion. I grant that I might be asking for something that the editors had no intention providing. Nevertheless, I note that in the introduction Shonkwiler and La Berge describe the time lapse since Fisher's original publication as bringing about an intensification of capitalism and a development "further into the dialectic of financialization and commodification" (3). In my view it is this mutation of capitalism that deserved a more sustained treatment if, as Dienst writes in the afterward, the contributors wholeheartedly sought "to grapple with their putative object, the life-world of contemporary capitalism" (249). This is why, regardless of the scholarly worth of each individual contribution, I find something wanting in the book. Simply put, I expected the contributors to take up the issue of the present ascendancy of finance and address it at some length, particularly since the editors mention it in the introduction.

It is not a coincidence that Fisher's term *capitalist realism*, focused as it is on the human response to the present mutation of capitalism and not on the mutation

itself, has proven quite useful in readings of culture and literature. I am tempted to say that this is so because cultural artefacts are more prone to address the human response than the structure within which it occurs. My reservation about this volume stems from the judgement that we have too many humanistic readings of responses and too few considerations of what Fisher calls the “irresistible forces.” One ought to keep in mind the fact that Fisher himself does not use his notion as a trans-historical concept, but to characterise a human response—or the impossibility of a human response—to a historical mutation of capitalism. There is no doubt that the disappearance of “political alternatives to capitalism,” as Fisher names them, contributed to the sense that capitalism was here to stay. I add that one particular development within capitalism itself can be seen as both an efficient strategy of its self-perpetuation and as a dynamic that closed off options antipodal to its logic. An observation in Fisher’s 2009 book alludes to this development but Fisher does not seem to recognize how important it is to his contention and to the emergent form of capitalism. Early in the book, gesturing to Deleuze and Guattari, Fisher wrote that “the deterritorializing impulses of capitalism have been confined to finance” (6). What he did not fully appreciate was that as time unfolded fewer and fewer domains would be left unsubsumed by the command of finance capital. I mention this oversight in Fisher because the contributors to the volume under consideration repeat the same marginalization of the major transformation in capitalism. If, to quote from Shonkwiler and La Berge’s introduction, *capitalist realism* as a methodology “demands an engagement with specific economic forms such as the commodity, money, and finance” (11), they should as editors have urged their contributors to focus more attentively on these economic categories.

What has become evident, particularly since the 2008 crisis, which I identify as the historical background of the collection, is that financial capital has experienced exponential growth during the last fifty years or so and that no domain of human life stands apart from its hegemony. Not only have we witnessed the unstoppable mobility and deterritorialization of finance, but we have witnessed the financialization of all territories of human life. Indicating that his use of Fisher’s concept comes after the 2008 crisis, Andrew Hoberek writes in his contribution to the collection that

nowadays “capital becomes its own autochthonous justification, existing beyond the necessity of ideological justification” (45). This repeats Fisher’s findings with a difference because Hoberek adds:

Following the subprime mortgage crisis the novel – straining like the news media to think the crisis in the absence of a robust systemic critique of capitalism – figures the gulf between capitalist theory and capitalist reality as a crisis in realistic representation as such (49).

I quote from Hoberek’s article because I think that his is one of the few readings in the collection that explicitly gestures to the present of financialized capitalism, to the unprecedented power of debt and money and how this impacts representation. It is indicative that he is the only one of the contributors who quotes from Dienst’s timely 2011 book *The Bonds of Debt* which I consider a must for anyone attempting to understand what is at stake in today’s capitalism.

I conclude with the contention that if Fisher gave finance short shrift in his description of capitalist realism, today this is no longer an option. Since the financial crisis of 2008 the notion of *financialization*—the idea that capitalism has mutated into a state where the financial sector has usurped the economy and positioned itself as the ultimate creator, arbitrator and measure of value—has become a commonplace. If the humanities, including literary studies, want to engage what is going on in the world at large they have to leave behind their disciplinary pathos: not merely interact with this or that field of knowledge but destroy the very confines of disciplines, including their own, and open themselves up to emergent problems and challenges. In my opinion the essays in this volume do not overstep their disciplinary confines in sufficient measure. But I recognize the counterargument that this strategy evinces a belief in the discipline and is part, as Michael W. Clune writes in the volume, of the “struggle to legitimate humanistic knowledge in the contemporary intellectual and institutional climate” (195). I simply hold that the struggle is a lost cause and the sooner we realize this the sooner we might yet find a niche for the kind of knowledge literature provides.

Paolo Simonetti and Umberto Rossi (eds). *Dream Tonight of Peacock Tails: Essays on the Fiftieth Anniversary of Thomas Pynchon's V*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015. 212pp

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Dream Tonight of Peacock Tails gathers together eight new articles on Pynchon's first novel, evenly distributed in two sections ("Re-Visions" and "V-locations"), along with an introduction written by Paolo Simonetti and a bibliography compiled by Mario Faraone. The articles have been collected from conferences that coincided with the occasion of *V*'s fiftieth anniversary in 2013, but do not pretend to address the issue of what it means for this novel to warrant having a book dedicated to it fifty years after its publication or the interpretive history of the novel during the fifty years between 1963 and 2013. The original conference panels—one at International Pynchon Week, on *V*'s locations, and one at the 22nd AISNA Conference, on rereading *V*. at fifty—supplied the themes, and some of the papers, for the book's two sections, the intent being to have a section addressing "a diachronic, historical axis" and a section addressing "a synchronic, spatial plane" (6), a division that fittingly alludes to *V*'s own two-plotline structure.

The focus of the historical section, "Re-Visions," doesn't always lend itself to the highlighting of the novel's history. Only one of the articles, Stipe Grgas's "Re-reading *V*. in the Emergency of the Crisis," raises the issue of our interpretive approach becoming revised through time, though Tore Rye Andersen's "Cherchez La Femme" does briefly review how the changes to the paratexts in different editions affect how readers' will be inclined to read the text. The other two articles in the section, Luc Herman and John M. Krafft's "Monkey Business" and Mario Faraone's "Travelling and Spying into Baedeker's Land," are more closely interested in revision: Herman and Krafft explore Pynchon's own revision of the novel, while Faraone discusses revisions that Pynchon works upon the traditions within which he writes, as well as the revisions wrought upon the novel-world by the perspectives of its characters.

One could call what each article does a part of the history of the book's creation, but one wouldn't apply the adjective *diachronic* to either one if the introduction had not directed readers to do so. Indeed, Faraone's article could be made to fit in with those in the next section: it focuses on the Egyptian episode, after all. The synchronic section, "V-Locations," is more successful at complying with the introduction's stated intentions. Its articles look at Pynchon's construction of place, as well as the relevant places' significance, particularly Florence (Umberto Rossi's "Florence, or Pynchon's Italian Job"); Paris (Clément Lévy's "'Paris for Love?')"); the underworld, the Classical version of which Pynchon draws upon (Jennifer Backman's "Katabasis, Orpheus, and Alligators"); and Malta (Paolo Simonetti's "'He Could Go to Malta and Possibly End It'").

The book then is not entirely successful by its own stated goals, chiefly because the required emphasis on *revision* in the articles in the first section does not necessarily lend itself to diachronic approaches to their subject. The articles, nonetheless, perceptively engage the elements of *V.* on which they focus, and just as importantly to my mind, most, if not all, of them open up areas beyond their immediate margins for future scholars to explore, and empower readers to find interpretive paths not explicitly taken, or not taken far enough, within the pages of the book. Furthermore, the articles fit together in ways not consciously intended, for commentary in one article sometimes gains significance in relation to commentary in another one, adding relevance to their being placed in a collection.

Re-Visions

Andersen's "Cherchez La Femme" might strike readers as a counter example to the ability of the articles to open new investigative directions, for Andersen *seems* to exhaust the possibilities. The essay's summary of the known facts regarding the choosing of a title and the back story of the paratexts of the first edition of the novel lead seamlessly into not just a reading of the original dust jacket and book design, as well as the images on the covers of the editions that followed, but also an analysis of how other paratextual features guide the audience's reception of the text. It's not that nothing else can be done with the material or that Andersen attempts to address

every paratext associated with *V*; it's that he covers the material he writes about so well that he creates the impression that there isn't much else to say. His analysis of the correlation between the visual elements of the dust jacket and the ambiguity of the figure *V*. in the text is particularly strong. It clearly demonstrates the ways that the materiality of the book influences interpretation, or "interferes with its meaning" (33), a point more pointedly stressed, especially with regard to the notion of interference, in Andersen's assessment of how the characterization of *V*. as a woman in the final paragraph of the book description on the inner flap of the Lippincott dust jacket and the placement of a woman on the cover of the Bantam paperback, as well as on most of the U.S. paperback editions that have followed, affect how readers will interpret the text. Identifying *V*. as a woman, Andersen argues, serves to undermine the novel's textual ambiguity, a problem Anderson's argument corrects, thereby refining how readers could be tempted to engage *V*.

Andersen does skip the Modern Library edition of the novel (1966), the dust jacket for which Pynchon saw in proof and approved, though not in effusive terms. He simply told James H. Silberman, the executive editor of Random House, "Got the Modern Library dust jacket. Pretty sharp, that Art Nouveau typeface—it fits. Colors, even in rough, look good."⁸ Not mentioning the Modern Library edition does not detract from the power of Andersen's discussion of the effects of *V*'s paratextual features. The absence merely raises the possibility of supplementing Andersen's insights. We might ask, for instance, why does Pynchon appear to have been unhappy with the Lippincott dust jacket as Faith Sale described it to him,⁹ a description that was undoubtably less thorough than Andersen's, and happy with the Modern Library

⁸ Thomas Pynchon, Letter to James H. Silberman, 21 June 1966.

⁹ Pynchon does not seem to have seen a proof of the dust jacket. His comment to Faith Sale, "I was afraid something like that would happen" (qtd. in Andersen 34), appears to reference her description of the dust jacket, not a copy of it. If Pynchon were commenting on an image, the referent of "something like that" would be unclear, as it is to those of us who read the October 1, 1962, letter to Faith at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center. Pynchon's dissatisfaction then seems to have been based on what Sale wrote in a letter that is not extant or, if it has been kept by Pynchon, not accessible. Indeed, Pynchon may have come to admire the dust jacket after seeing it, if not immediately at least in the years that followed, for he allowed an image of it to be used for the novel's e-edition, which appeared after he had acquired the clout to demand that a different image be used.

one, which presents “just a two-dimensional sign” (Andersen 34) rather than the monumental three-dimensional V. of the original dust jacket? May it have been the very monumentality of the “V.” image, which evokes a Baedeker landscape of “inanimate monuments” (V. 408), one that could be rendered “two-dimensional, as is the Street” (409) by the text, and thus evokes an inanimateness to V. that is more complete than Pynchon seems to have decided to allow?

This last possibility may be suggested by “Monkey Business,” in which Herman and Krafft once again join up to guide us into the untitled V.-typescript at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin, TX. “Millennium,” the typescript’s deleted tenth chapter, proves a valuable place to gain insight into Pynchon’s thinking about V., despite, or because of, his unwillingness to keep it. Particularly illuminating is Herman and Krafft’s discussion of how including the chapter would have altered our experience of the eponymous figure. Pynchon told Smith that he had intended to hint in “Millennium” that V. had progressed into a more fully inanimate state by 1955, having become “a toy ape” (Pynchon to Smith, qutd. Herman and Krafft 15), a detail that would have provided, beyond Stencil’s construction, a confirmation of part of “the history of this female/inanimate alleged agent” (15). Removing the chapter thus leaves “Stencil’s idiosyncratic historiographic construction ... more richly ambiguous” (16) and perhaps leaves V. less fit to be represented as a monument, a concrete “tangible thing in the world” (34) as Andersen describes the V.-image on the Lippincott dust jacket.

Snippets of the “Millennium” chapter—including “the entire bathroom scene on typescript pages 170–171, in which Fina asks Profane to deflower her” (14)—do appear in the novel, and the contrast between those snippets and text that was removed provides ample room for Herman and Krafft to discuss the workings of Pynchon’s editorial mind. The discussion is strongest when its insights are grounded in the extant correspondence between Pynchon and Corlies Smith, that is, the discussion of the significance of leaving out the “toy ape.” Those parts that are more conjectural often seem just as convincing, for example, the idea that “the switch between typescript chapters 9 and 10 from first- to third-person narration for Profane’s story inspired Pynchon to apply that person switch to Stencil’s stories” (16). Yet the need to conjecture, however well-grounded in a knowledge of Pynchon’s work, provides an

opening for other critics, as do other elements of the article. To take just one example to illustrate how matters that Hermann and Krafft discuss open paths of inquiry, we can look at the Millennium chapter's apparent allusions to Shakespeare, specifically *Richard II* and *I Henry IV*. "In *Richard II*, Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, helps the king's cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, usurp the throne to become Henry IV. But in *I Henry IV*, Northumberland is part of a group of ultimately unsuccessful rebels against King Henry" (19–20). Should our understanding of Pynchon's use of those names consider the common reading of Bolingbroke's rise as England's emergence from the Medieval era into the early modern "Renaissance" era? And does Pynchon's use of those Shakespearean names in the typescript, if not the novel, provide context for reading their presence in Pynchon's published work, particularly "Low-Lands" and "The Secret Integration"?

Mario Faraone, whose contribution, it must be said, could have used more heavy-handed editing and had its citations more carefully checked, aims to demonstrate how Pynchon reworks nineteenth-century travel writings (particularly the Baedeker Guides), spy fiction, and detective novels. Faraone is at his strongest when he is discussing *V*'s use of the travel literature, illustrating not just how Pynchon uses his main source, the Baedeker, but also how Pynchon's text fits in, perhaps incidentally, with nineteenth-century fictions—a story by Anthony Trollope in particular—that were influenced by the genre to which the Baedeker Guides belong. Faraone is at his weakest when he turns to detective novels, mentioning their importance without any sustained discussion of the genre and then quickly turning to his main interest, the problem Stencil, as well as *V*'s reader-detectives, has fulfilling the function of the spy/detective. "Stencil's idea of fully connecting, precisely tracing and unequivocally interpreting several international crises and cloak-and-dagger activities is doomed to fail" (67) because all the information he gathers about *V*. is Stencilized. That insight won't strike critics of *V*. as especially novel, even if it hasn't been articulated in those exact terms, but the article suggests something much more interesting, something that may have been brought more clearly to the surface if Faraone had attempted to tie the various strands of his argument together more carefully in, say, a concluding section. The issue, in any case, ought to be taken up and explored more rigorously.

The relationship between tourists' experience of a country they are visiting, Egypt in the context of Faraone's article, and the country they see is analogous to the relationship between the material Stencil gathers and his understanding of that material. In other words, just as the information Stencil retrieves is Stencilized, the Egypt that tourists see is Baedekered. In fact, even the perception of the local inhabitants, or at least those drawn into the Baedeker world because of their being obliged to accommodate travelers, has been colored by the codes established by the genre of travel writing that tourists had come to rely on. Take P. Aïeul's "shifting hypotheses about the identities of the travelers and the motives behind their conduct" (56). Although these hypotheses all turn out to be wrong, they are developed, at least at first, from the expectations the Baedeker has created and then perhaps, though Faraone doesn't make the connection, from the expectations of the spy-novel genre: Aïeul, after all, wonders if he might be looking at participants of a plot involving anarchists and assassinations. Aïeul might be able to accommodate the latter possibilities, perhaps because his place within the Baedeker world is at a slight remove, but those more firmly integrated into it don't seem to have the same liberty. Maxwell Rowley-Bugge, whose survival depends on his being both an observed element of Baedeker land and an observer of it, is threatened when confronted with possibilities outside his expectations. Goodfellow and Bongo-Shaftsbury's simulation therefore "frightened him" (V. 74 *quod*. in Faraone 59), as if its existence threatened his very existence, and he flees the intrusion. The Great Game, that is, the game of espionage "involving European countries" (60), potentially undermines the game Rowley-Bugge plays and thus his identity.

Faraone, despite his focus, is interested in more than V's Egyptian episode. Indeed, he asks us to consider whether the clash or convergence of Baedeker codes and spy/detective codes—or their analogues in the novel's different settings—can tell us something about the novel as a whole, maybe even in relation to the risk posed by V's intrusion into its world. The danger of such an intrusion is suggestively made in the "Florence, April, 1899" journal entry in which the elder Stencil writes, "There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she. God grant that I may never be called upon to write the answer, either here

or in any official report" (*V.* 53). Speaking of this journal entry, Grgas notes in the article that follows Faraone's, "First, the *V.* entity is depersonalized, it is something that transcends human embodiment. And, second, it is something that frightens, that the human stands in awe of" (82–83). To which we might add, it is something that Stencil hopes to avoid confronting much as Rowley-Bugge flees to avoid more fully confronting the intrusion of the other into his world. Is the intrusion of *V.* in the novel world analogous to that of spies into Baedeker land? Grgas would seem to suggest that the answer is yes, even though the only apparent thing that his article shares with Faraone's is a concern for how perception is shaped. Grgas's interest is in the critics' perception, not so much that of the characters: he asks us to turn our attention to the effects that our place in history have on our perception of the novel, arguing that positioning readings of *V.* within the context of our most recent economic crisis, as well as within that of Pynchon's entire oeuvre, particularly his three most recent novels, compels critics to take a more careful look at *V.*'s "economic theme" (81), which had been "submerged in [earlier] readings privileging a different focus" (78).

To demonstrate that such is the case, Grgas first illustrates how several economic markers—"evocations of the Great Depression" (81), money and its relation to social differentiation, the rise of consumerism, and an emerging globalization—lie behind the circumstances in which the novel's characters, particularly those among the Whole Sick Crew, find themselves entangled. From there, he goes on to argue that "Pynchon maps the object [*V.*] of the search onto" the economic nexus, noting that *V.*'s predilection to incorporate the inanimate is analogous "to the compulsion of capitalism to incorporate, to ever expand, to turn everything into a commodity" (83). The use to which Pynchon puts the animate-inanimate dichotomy, as Grgas argues, is not the only element of *V.* to point toward its "economic theme." The novel's suggestion that *V.*'s nature is Gothic and Hugh Godolphin's negative identification of "her" as a "Nothing" also point to that theme, for these associations connect *V.* to Marx's notion of capital, which is "constantly sucking in living labour as its soul, vampire-like" (Marx *quod.* Grgas 84). Regardless of how far readers of *V.* will want to follow Grgas, who himself registers the concern that readers will think he is going too far,

“Re-reading *V.*” presents a compelling argument, deserving our attention because of what it adds to our understanding of the political engagements of Pynchon’s work at the start of his career.

V-Locations

The second section of *Dream Tonight of Peacock Tails* turns to notions of place, opening with Rossi’s consideration of Pynchon’s Florence, which is rendered geographically accurate, Rossi tells us, but typographically inaccurate, at least occasionally: the layout of the Florence, as it is described, is correct, but the Italian used to establish its reality is not always as precise. Some of the errors are apparently a result of the Italian’s deriving from Italian-American usage (a possibility reinforced by the Italian in *Bleeding Edge*) and opera libretti rather than the Italian spoken in Florence in 1899 or the present: “When Mantissa cries ‘Andiam’ (V. 187) he sounds more like a character out of a Donizetti or Puccini opera than a real Italian” (96).

Other mistakes could have had their origin in Pynchon’s sources, but some are almost certainly meaningful. Mantissa, for example drinks “Broglia wine,” which, Rossi observes, is Pynchon’s transformation of Brolio wine: *Broglia* is “an Italian noun meaning ‘fraud, intrigue, manoeuvre, rigging;’ a term perfectly fitting the Florentine episode” (98). Pynchon could also have misspelled the bridge “Ponte San Trìnita” (stress on first syllable) as “Ponte San Trinità,” Rossi conjectures, to draw our attention to it (101), although that possibility, which assumes Pynchon trusted the audience enough to recognize the error, isn’t the only one. We could conjecture, beyond Rossi, that Pynchon is making some sort of architectural pun and alluding to the ruins of the abbey of San Trinità, which is mentioned in a Baedeker (225),¹⁰ for the bridge itself was in ruins between 1944 and 1958 (see Rossi 101). That’s not to say that all the errors are intentional, and one might get a better sense of those Pynchon insisted on keeping if one were to compare *V.*’s Italian with the Italian in the translation put out in 1965 by “Bompiani Editore of Milano,” the publisher to which Candida Donadio, Pynchon’s agent, sold the Italian translation rights sometime before June

¹⁰ Karl Baedeker, *Italy: Third Part: Southern Italy and Sicily, with Excursions to the Lipari Islands, Malta, Sardinia, Tunis, And Corfu*, Leipsic: Karl Baedeker, 1887.

1963: “Which is the only thing about the whole business I’m really happy with,” Pynchon told the Sales.¹¹ The value of such a comparison, of course, would depend on whether or not Pynchon worked with the translator. Given his enthusiasm for the idea of an Italian translation, he may well have wanted to. (Has anyone thought to inquire if there are any Pynchon letters—maybe even in Italian!—in the files of Bompiani, which is now owned by Giunti Editore?)

While his discussion of Pynchon’s Italian is informative, Rossi’s illustration of Florence’s significance to *V.* goes beyond the hints about Pynchon’s construction of the city that can be gleaned from mistakes, intentional or unintentional. Indeed, the article’s more interesting contribution to our understanding of *V.* lies in the connections Rossi makes between the history of specific locations in Florence, as well as of the city itself, and the events in the Florence chapter. Evan Godolphin’s presence on Via dei Panzani, a street that has a connection to Vincenzo Peruggia’s 1911 theft of the Mona Lisa, or Gioconda, for instance, serves as a starting point for Rossi’s reading of the fictional theft of the *Birth of Venus* in relation to the historical theft of Gioconda, just as Florence, a synecdoche of Italy, serves as a means of demonstrating the significance of Italian history—particularly with reference to Machiavelli’s place in that history—to *V.* and Pynchon’s thinking elsewhere. Rossi connects the historical figures Giuseppe Mazzini and Giuseppe Garibaldi, whom he describes as “*padri della patria* [fathers of the homeland]” (Rossi’s translation 109), to the characters Rafael Mantissa, whom Thomas Moore noted represents, in Machiavellian terms, the politics of the fox (265), and, “in some counter-factual and counter-historical way” (109), the Gaucho, “a representative of the politics of the lion” (108), the other term in the Machiavellian dichotomy. Rossi also calls attention to Pynchon’s playing with the Machiavellian categories of *virtù* and *fortuna*, which “repeatedly appear in *V.*” (107), and argues they influenced his construction of the paranoia/anti-paranoia opposition in *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

Lévy’s “Paris for Love?” provides a more theoretical grounding for the type of criticism Rossi engages in, situating it within geocritical approaches to texts, a form

¹¹ Thomas Pynchon. Letter to Faith and Kirkpatrick Sale, 2 June 1963.

of criticism that “allows in-depth exploration of fictional spaces through the actual spaces to which they refer. It is all the more interesting as novels often transform the configuration of real places to adapt them to the narrator’s perspective and the story’s conditions and needs” (119). Lévy, of course, is interested in Pynchon’s Paris, and the first thing he notes about it is that it is not the Paris of Pynchon’s American literary precursors. Pynchon avoids revisiting the “places already claimed by Miller, Hemingway, or Fitzgerald” (121), as well as, perhaps, Gertrude Stein. The Paris of *V* then is not all that is foreign to U.S. readers: the “literary geography of Paris” (Wells, qutd. in Lévy 119) is foreign to the Paris that readers had grown accustomed to reading about, that is, the “‘Americanized’ Paris” (Wells, qutd. in Lévy 119) fashioned in celebrated novels from the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, *V*’s Paris is in a sense foreign to *V*, for, unlike Cairo or Florence, it is not primarily presented as a Baedeker city, except when Mélanie arrives in it. Mélanie’s arrival in Paris, a scene fashioned with the aid of the Baedeker as Lévy demonstrates, or, to be more precise, her taxi ride away from the train station that she enters the city through could be characterized as the novel’s exit from the familiar tourist world that *V*’s plots previously meandered through. Lévy thus gets the impression that the chapter is the last one in which “the name Karl Baedeker is cited” (123), despite “Baedeker” being used as an adjective in the Epilogue (475). That Lévy implies that “*V*. in Love” charts a departure from Baedeker land renews the significance of the chapter for future readers, assuming the implication holds up to more careful analyses than I am offering here.

Backman and Simonetti’s articles are wider ranging, for they focus not on the places that launch their inquiries but on the significance of the places they discuss to the novel as a whole. Backman’s discussion of the underworld comes by way of her analysis of the importance of the Orpheus myth, which, she argues, “informs the experience of several main characters” by “evoking Orpheus through four distinct qualities—skill as a musician, engagement in a fruitless quest, descent into the underworld, and ultimate fragmentation” (134). No character embodies all these qualities, suggesting that the novel is itself the fragmented Orpheus figure, “that Pynchon himself acts as a maenad” (147), adding significance to the novel’s title: *V*. in her feminine form, after all, is the character who suffers literal fragmentation.

McClintic Sphere possesses musical skill and has a peripheral connection to “the figurative underworlds of the city” (135) but not to a quest or a descent. Stencil is the character engaged in a fruitless quest, the one for V., the fulfilment of which would likely prove unsatisfying, for “the real quest[, Stencil comes to understand,] is to maintain the sense of purpose that having a ‘goal’ establishes.” Thus it could be argued, recalling Faraone’s comment about the method by which Stencil thwarts the possibility of achieving his goal, that Stencil maintains his animation by means of his Stencilizing.

Benny Profane and Fausto Maijstral are the characters whose experiences are informed by descent. Backman’s examination of the relationship between the Classical underworld and the sewers into which Profane descends as well as the Orphic quality to Profane’s descent is more focused than her discussion of Fausto’s experience of the underworld. Numerous connections are made between Classical views of the underworld and the descriptions of the New York sewers and between the nature of Profane’s experience and Orpheus’s. Backman, of course, is able to imply the Classical nature of Malta’s underworld space by illustrating what it shares with the one Profane enters. Avoiding repetition isn’t the only reason she has for establishing a different approach for her reading of the Maltese underworld, a reading that is built on an appropriation of notions that Gaston Bachelard establishes in *The Poetics of Space* (1958). The symbolism of Maltese space and of Fausto’s experience “is complicated by the destructive effects of war” (141), so the underground, Backman argues, takes on the quality of domestic space, at least in some respects, while the street level becomes a version of Hades, which Fausto, unlike Profane, explores for poetic inspiration. His experience thus partakes of the Orphic tradition, the one in which the Orpheus myth is seen as “an allegory of poetic production” (Sean Desilets qtd. Backman 143) and, thereby, of the production of an animating force.

Simonetti focuses more fully on Malta, his interest being its value as the “location” of the epilogue, of which he proposes an “alternative reading” (154), and its status as the “prime location”—in the real-estate sense of “first in excellence, quality, and value” (156)—of the novel. But “location,” including the prime variety, isn’t simply to be understood in its spatial sense: it also has “technological and cinematic

reverberations" (156), that is, respectively, as "a position in a memory capable of holding information" and as "a natural setting in which a film ... is made" (OED qtd. in Simonetti 156). In setting up his argument in such terms or in his decision to give greater emphasis to the cinematic rather than the technological sense of his location metaphor, Simonetti sells himself short, despite his realization that in *V*, as in *Gravity's Rainbow*, cinema plays an "important role" (157) and his effective concluding remarks on Pynchon's deconstructing of the "cinematic imagination" (168) in his first novel. It is Malta as a location that "holds information"—although more than just "a word," as the definition that Simonetti cites has it—that comes across most strongly in his recounting in, dare I say, encyclopedia-like detail the cinematic, literary, historical, geographical, mythological etc. import that the island possesses. Suggesting Simonetti should have given greater emphasis to the technological rather than the cinematic reverberations of "location," of course, is easier to say than do, and Simonetti expertly brings much to the surface that "becomes opaque and shows 'nothing at all of what came to lie beneath'" (168) after the waterspout disappears in the novel's epilogue.

The value of *Dream Tonight of Peacock Tails* rests not just on the strength of the articles and the directions toward which they may lead us but also on how they complement each other to generate insight that they would not have produced on their own. Many readers, of course, will pick and choose which articles to read based on their research interests, but Pynchon scholars will be well served if they read the collection as a book rather than treat each article as an isolated work in itself and seek out the connections among the various contributions.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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